DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 434 IR 012 982

AUTHOR Feldman, Marvin
TITLE History, Communications and Some Further Perils of Technology.
PUB DATE 28 Jan 85
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented to the Faculty of the Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, NY, January 28, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Colleges; Communications; *Educational Responsibility; Higher Education; History; *Mass Media; *Science and Society; *Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *Fashion Institute of Technology NY

ABSTRACT

Presented to the faculty of the Fashion Institute of Technology (New York City) after the acceptance by the New York Board of Regents of the school's plan to offer master's degree programs, these remarks focus on the problems presented by rapid developments in communications technology and the responsibility of the faculty to participate in the continuing search for solutions to these problems. It is pointed out that the means of communication have social consequences that go far beyond merely increasing the efficiency of message transmission, and the influence on earlier civilizations of the means of communication prevalent at the time is briefly sketched. It is also argued that the medium can degrade the quality of thought as media that require less thought and effort displace those that require more, and that mass communications, including moving pictures and television with their emphasis on mass appeal, are not only enemies of quality of product, but enemies of quality of thought. It is concluded that the answer is not to resist new communications technologies, but to prepare students so that the school's graduates are in control of the new media rather than passive practitioners of their techniques, and able to embrace the techniques of the future without destroying the essential heritage of the past. (RP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED290434

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Marvin Feldman
Remarks to Faculty
January 28, 1985

Fashion Institute of
Technology
227 West 27th Street
New York, New York 10001

HISTORY, COMMUNICATIONS AND SOME FURTHER PERILS OF TECHNOLOGY

Since we last met, the regents have endorsed our plan to offer Masters degrees. While it was not unexpected, it was a profoundly important moment in F.I.T.'s history and a fitting affirmation of the new maturity we feel as we celebrate our 40th birthday.

Our Masters program marks the beginning of a new era for us. We began 40 years ago as a tiny trade school. Now our metamorphosis is complete. We have become a great institution of higher learning.

We did not achieve this new status accidently. It was the result of a process as intense and extensive as David O. Selznick's casting for Scarlett O'Hara in Gone With the Wind or the selection of the first class of astronauts. I doubt if any institution has been examined and re-examined as often and as thoroughly as F.I.T. these last five years. But we have overcome. The authorities have decreed that we are equipped to become a major multi-purpose institution of higher learning--an "IHL" in the jargon of the trade.

Our resources, including those for research, are second to none. We are on the threshold of a new period of great possibilities. But whether or not we realize them now depends on our courage, intelligence, and resolve not to squander the precious resources we have here today.

In the early years, there was a comforting simplicity about our mission as a vocational school. We trained people for known opportunities in our industries. Much of our strength, I have believed, derived from this clear specialized sense of institutional direction. We must never lose it!

Yet from here on, it will not be so easy. Now we have larger responsibilities that cannot be so readily defined. There is an uncomfortable complexity and ambiguity about the mission of an institution of higher learning. We must join as full partners in the continuing search for answers to some elemental questions that have yet to be clearly formulated.

IR012982

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marvin Feldman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

We have always sought to give our students more than skills, to lead them into the uncharted territory beyond technique. But now we must undertake that responsibility more systematically and conscientiously, particularly in our B.S. and B.F.A. programs, now that we have moved on to award the M.A. We have the courses needed to achieve those goals in our curricula. But we need to present them under a different format. That is why the President's Forums scheduled for our 40th year could not be more timely. I hope we will use them to begin what must now be a continuing consideration of our enlarged mission as a vocationally oriented institution of higher learning. I'm using these faculty and staff meetings to suggest an agenda for the forums.

In fact, these conversations have taken on a national dimension. I have been invited to Washington next month by the Department of Education to debate our educational philosophy with the heads of the National Institute of Education Study Group and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Whether I win or lose the debate, our model is attracting national attention.

In August, I discussed with you the perils of technology as embodied in machines for making things. We traced quickly through history, man's abiding and legitimate concern that technology might overwhelm humanness. The question is whether we use technology in ways that will degrade and obliterate humanness or enhance and enrich it. The path that prevails will depend on how well we succeed in imposing our human intention on the machine through design!

Today I want to carry this conversation--this discussion of how to keep culture alive in an age of technology--over into the crucial realm of communications. In many ways, it is in communications that technology is working its most stunning magic, far beyond anything we have seen even in the high tech cad/cam systems we've been working with. We are told that on a manned space flight, information equivalent to that in the whole of the Encyclopedia Brittanica is transmitted every second. Technology has permitted an experiment with a national daily newspaper. Television's communicative capacities continue to explode. Orbita Technologies Corporation has opened a window that allows us to see the same television at the same moment eighty-eight million Soviet households are seeing it.

But I am not going to enumerate these breathtaking technological accomplishments. You know them better than I do. You're working every day to intergrate the new options in our communications curricula. Today I want to talk about what they mean. As a trade school we could simply rejoice in the triumph of technology--say "wow" and go on about our business. Now we must consider its perils. "The gravest danger in talking about communications," a wise man said, "is the banal repetition of what everyone knows."

I'm going to try to speak instead about what no one knows for sure--about communications. We have come to recognize that the means of communications have social consequences that go far, far beyond merely increasing the efficiency of message transmission. The Canadian historian, Harold Innis, pioneered the illumination of this arresting aspect of world history. His famous student, Marshall McLuhan, enjoyed a huge, if perishable, popularity in the sixties in spite of an annoying lack of clarity in his books. I, for one, never really understood him. A friend of mine once told McLuhan, the great authority on media, that he had perhaps overlooked his own natural medium. McLuhan wrote books of questionable clarity while his real talent was writing aphorisms for fortune cookies: "The medium is the message" "Is there life before death?" and so forth. McLuhan was not amused.

But Innis pointed out that history's greatest changes were often induced by changes in the means of communication. The change from speech to writing triggered vast upheavals. The oral tradition produced a reverence for age. Old people had for centuries been the natural custodians of society's wisdom. Writing tended instead to foster hierarchies of skill.

The materials on which messages were recorded were sometimes more important than the words themselves. Innis explains in riveting detail how durable media, such as stone, clay, or parchment, which emphasized time, reinforced a society's tendencies toward decentralization and hierarchy. On the other hand, lighter, less durable media, like papyrus and paper, emphasized space and enabled centralized control of far-flung activities and less local hierarchy.

Innis shows how the monarchies of Egypt and Persia and the Roman Empire were essentially products of writing. Communications media can change history's course and man's condition--and not always in constructive ways. Historians look at pre-literate societies and lament what we may have lost when written language displaced the exclusive hegemony of the spoken word. Sapir, for example, has written: "Many primitive languages have a formal richness, a latent luxuriance of expression that eclipses anything known to the languages of modern civilization." Even today, as we struggle to translate words of ancient Asian languages into English we recognize that modern languages are inadequate: they cannot express the full meaning of the ancient texts.

The medium can also degrade the quality of thought. Language embodies the terms in which human experience is defined. Grammar is not a deadly device designed to torment innocent children. Its terms--number, gender, tense, case, mode, voice, aspect, and a host of others--are the categories essential to the thought process.

Think of what we lost when grammar was deemphasized in our public schools. Seymour Mandelbaum,in his book Community and Communications, explains how people skilled in the use of language can keep more relationships in mind simultaneously. They can generate more permutations from a set of ideas and thus select alternatives from a wider range of choice. In other words, people who know their language can think better.

There is another peril of a different order, a kind of Gresham's Law at work in communications, which causes media that require less thought and effort to displace those that require more. As printing made the written word a mass medium, Napoleon could say: "Complaints are made that we have no literature; this is the fault of the Minister of the Interior." But history's indictment was much broader. The lack of artistic achievement in post-revolutionary France was the handiwork of complex historical forces that the unfortunate minister could neither see nor comprehend. Mass communication, highly vulnerable to misuse, had become only an instrument of politics and had overwhelmed literature.

Critic Lyman Bryson has said that "All forms of mass communication are monstrously voracious. They use up material at such a rate that standards of excellence. . .cannot be maintained." In the 1880's, Cyrus Curtis discovered that reading matter could be distributed through a magazine in such a way as to coax readers through its pages, causing them to look at the advertising which took up most of the page. This simple invention simultaneously spawned one great communication industry and gave massive impetus to another: mass magazines and print advertising. Do you remember Liberty, the Curtis magazine that told its readers how many minutes to spend with each article? Remember Collier's?

Meanwhile Thomas Hardy complained that narrative and verse were losing organic form, symmetry, and the "force of reserve." We can only imagine what he would have said about Rupert Murdoch. Just as mass production is perceived as the enemy of quality of product, mass communication has been seen as the enemy of quality in thought. Humanist Joseph Wood Krutch, in a famous article titled "Is the Common Many Too Common?" found the mass media "forcing out of the field every enterprise that is not based on mass appeal."

Social observers marvelled with everybody else about the magic of moving pictures. But at the same time they were uneasy about the movies, for the same reason I am watching closely what we do here in television advertising. Virginia Woolf, in a remarkably prophetic piece about film written for The New Republic sixty years ago, saw the source of the danger:

> A strange thing happened. While all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully clothed. It can say anything before it has anything to say.

But even then, she saw film's possible redemption in responding to "visual emotion which is of no use either to the painter or poet," using symbols "quite unlike real objects." She wrote:

> The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed [for] which the writer can only toil in vain, the dream architecture of arches and battlements, of cascades falling and fountains rising. No fantasy could be too farfetched or insubstantial. The past could be unrolled, distances annihilated and the gulfs that dislocate novels...smoothed away.

Before most of us in this room were born, Virginia Woolf foresaw the era of what we came to call "special effects," the techniques we must present here at F.I.T. in our own new courses in television advertising. She could imagine the great promise of this powerful new medium in 1926.

But she also smelled danger. Just as written words were once thought dangerous to the health of oral tradition, electronic media have been, from the beginning, seen as hazards to the health of a society built on the written word. In 1930, the critics said that radio, the first electronic mass medium, merely "tickled the tastes of the mentally deficient." Remember when Newton Minow, as Kennedy's chairman of the F.C.C., called television a "vast wasteland?" (A couple of years later, when Minow said things were somewhat better, a reporter asked him if we might now call television a halfvast wasteland.)

These critics are not reactionary soreheads. There are some perils here--some powerful, perverse tendencies. If there is one clear lesson in history, it is that technique can be pernicious if it is not somehow subordinated to intellect. Mass communication does tend to drive out quality. Simple, superficial sensory media do tend to drive out the more intellectually demanding media and undermine thought. Ted Carpenter, another media philosopher, wonders whether electronic media are not already causing young people to seek togetherness through mediocrity--to boycott the exceptional. He foresees the passing of the impulse to learn, a diminution of interest in all previous achievement, a loss of a sense of relevance.

The answer, of course, is not to resist new communications technologies, even if we could. Our graduates must be in control of the new media, not just passive practitioners of their techniques. The new communications technologies have constructive possibilities that are immense. I still believe they could help us transform the world into a scattered but still united global village in which work, school, entertainment, and shopping are all detached from reliance on space and the continuing misuse of natural resources. Technology has vast potential for enlarging human possibilities.

But it has a corresponding negative potential; technology can also destruct and degrade. McLuhan, in a rare moment of clarity, put it plainly:

> The environments that we involuntarily create by our innovations are both services and disservices that make very heavy demands on our awareness and understanding.

Awareness and understanding--that is what institutions of higher learning are for; that is what we are for.

I am not raising these questions with you because I have answers for them, but because they illustrate the larger intellectual responsibilities that accompany our new status. As a trade school we needed only to concern ourselves with technique. Now we have tasks of a higher order. We must concern ourselves with meaning, with moral implication, with cultural context, with design, and with communication. As a trade school we could simply teach how to write an effective ad or produce a compelling television commercial. Now we must go further; we must create an awareness and understanding of the larger consequences of such communications, so that we can embrace technique of the future without destroying the essential heritage of the past.

These are some of the issues I hope will be discussed in our next Presidential Forum, and that all of you will participate in them actively.